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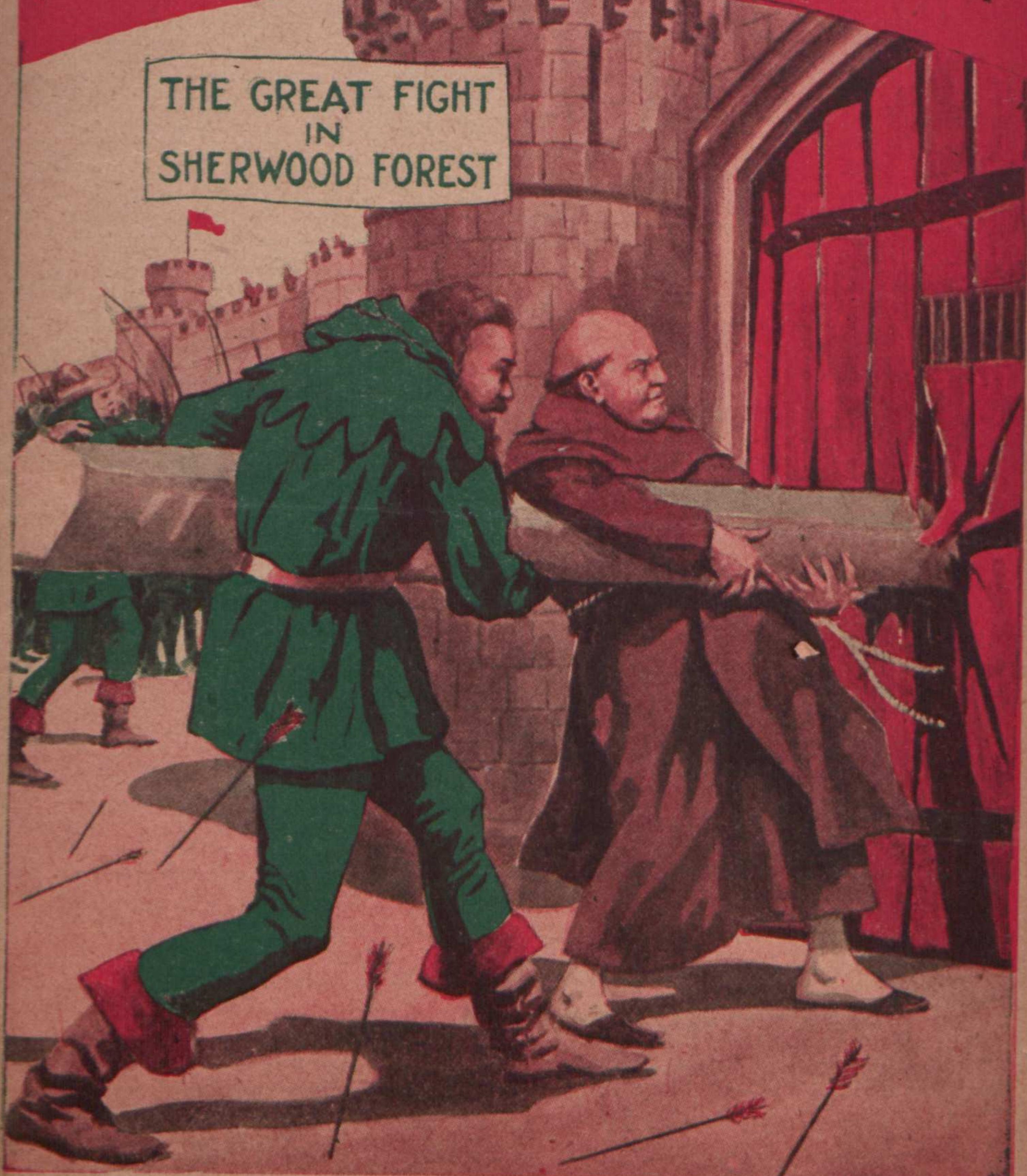
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The Great Fight in Sherwood Forest

CHAPTER 1.

A Solitary Wayfarer.

IT was sunset.

Along the silent highway that cut through the northern part of Sherwood Forest from Wantley to the banks of the Don, a solitary figure was plodding somewhat wearily. His dress, which was somewhat travel-stained, consisted of a grey tunic bordered with fur; long hose of the same colour, and boots of brown leather, the tops of which were fastened with a strap just above the ankle. He carried no weapon of any description, not even a cudgel or staff.

The sun was setting upon one of the rich grassy glades of the forest. Hundreds of broad-headed, wide-branched oaks flung their gnarled arms over a thick carpet of the most delicious green-sward. In some places they were intermingled with beeches, hollies, and copsewood of various descriptions, so closely as totally to intercept the level beams of the sinking sun.

"Methinks I shall scarce reach my journey's end ere darkness sets in," muttered the grey-costumed wayfarer. "The swineherd whom I met but a short while since told me that Rutherford lay but a short five miles along this road. I have covered four already, but no sign yet do I see either of house or castle. By my faith! but that fool of a hind was either cracking a sorry jest

at my expense, or else knew naught of what he talked about. Well, at the worst, I shall have to pass a night in the forest, and one might have a worse bed than twigs and dry leaves. Ha! whom have we here?"

The sound of galloping hoofs was borne to the ears on the light evening breeze, and pausing in his stride he swung round and gazed down the road in the direction whence he had come. A cloud of dust obscured the coming horsemen, but as they approached nearer he noted that they were a gay cavalcade of nobles. Their attendants wore no armour, but were clad in their ordinary robes of peace, and were laughing and talking as they rode.

The road at the point which the wayfarer had reached was of no great breadth, being just there but little wider than a bridle path. It was bordered on each side by a muddy ditch. He waited near the edge of the road to allow the cavalcade to pass. In a few moments the foremost of the horsemen were upon him.

"Out of the way, fellow!" cried the rider. "Get you into the ditch which is the fitting place for such as you!"

Having delivered himself of this contemptuous and insulting speech, the rider struck at the pedestrian fiercely with a whip which he carried.

The wayfarer, however, did not budge a single inch, but as the lash descended he caught it in his right hand, and, snatching it from the

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other's grasp, hurled it far into the forest, where it dropped into a thorn thicket.

"By the mass, caitiff! but you shall pay dearly for that act of insolence," cried the rider savagely as he drew forth his sword.

Most of the cavalcade rode on, some laughing, some advising that "meet punishment be dealt out to the insolent knave."

"That shall be done in such manner," replied the rider, who was facing the grey wayfarer, "that, if the knave hasn't confessed this morning, he will never have another chance."

The sword was raised, and the blade flashed in the last ray of the setting sun. In another moment the daring pedestrian would have suffered the penalty of his boldness most assuredly, but ere the blade could descend an arrow sang in the air like a huge hornet and pierced the upraised hand of the cavalier, so that his sword fell with a clatter to the earth.

He uttered a cry of pain, followed by groans and imprecations, while at the same time the wayfarer picked the sword up, broke it across his knee, and flung the pieces after the riding-switch.

Those of the gay cavalcade who had ridden by, now returned to see what was the matter, and on hearing what had taken place vowed vengeance on the archer who had loosed the clothyard shaft with such disastrous effect, yet so opportunely for the man in the grey tunic.

But no archer was to be seen. Not a sign of a living person along the whole borders of the forest on either hand. Not the rustle of a dried twig, not a sound of life, save the song of the birds beneath the greenwood tree.

Nevertheless, it was not a matter to be passed lightly over. Knights, esquires, and retainers, the wounded knight among them, rode off to scour the forest in the direction whence the arrow had been fired.

He of the grey tunic stood watching them until they were lost to sight amid the trees, and a grim smile curled upon his lips.

"Methinks you will have all your trouble for nothing," he murmured,

"for an I be not mistaken 'twas one of Robin Hood's gallant band that sent that shaft on its errand. But you and I, Sir Hugo de Martival, will meet again on more equal terms, and it will go hard but what I requite the insult you have put upon me to-day, and also avenge those wrongs which I have suffered at the hands of Prince John, and for which, as I shrewdly guess, you are mainly responsible."

Having delivered himself of these words, the young man—as stalwart a specimen of young English manhood as could well be met with, even in those days—leaped the ditch and strode swiftly away along a by-path of the forest.

The sun had dipped below the ridge of rising ground to the west, and the evening shadows were stealing over glade and thicket, valley and hill, when the party who had been scouring the forest in search of the mysterious archer returned to the highway unsuccessful.

"A murrain on the fellow!" exclaimed the one who had been wounded; "could we but have caught him, I would have hanged him forthwith to the nearest tree."

"'Twill be one of those pestilent outlaws, Sir Hugo," ventured an esquire. "One of the band who own for a leader the famous Robin Hood. He who calls himself the King of Sherwood Forest."

"His reign will come to a sudden and violent end, an I but lay my hands on him," muttered Sir Hugo de Martival.

"'Twill not be the first instance of a monarch's life ending suddenly and violently," remarked a companion of Sir Hugo's, who was known as Sir Guy de Wyville, the Knight of Tunstall.

"No, nor the last," returned Sir Hugo significantly.

An esquire rode up at this moment, and, addressing the latter, said:

"The original cause of this trouble has also vanished," Sir Hugo. "I mean the insolent varlet in the grey tunic and hose who ventured to bandy words with you."

"Let him go, there is no need to waste further time in the quest," replied the knight. "The darkness is already upon us, and we have still a league further to ride. Onward! onward!"

As the cavalcade, somewhat shorn of its gaiety, pressed on down the road once more, Sir Hugo, who now rode somewhat apart from the others, muttered to himself:

"It likes me not, this encounter with that man in grey. There was that in his bearing which bespoke one of noble blood, notwithstanding that he wore the dress of a commoner. Can it be possible that he is back once more—he whom I hate more than any other living man? Nay, it cannot be. What would he be doing here in such a guise? I saw his features but indistinctly, yet by the mass! now I recall them again, there is a great similarity. Yet Sir Rupert de Visine assured me that he was held captive by the Saracens, with no hope of ransom."

But whether the man whom Sir Hugo hated—and, be it said, evidently also feared—was in captivity or not, the knight seemed to be filled with troubled thoughts, and rode alone in moody silence for the remainder of the journey.

* * * *

Meanwhile, the grey wayfarer strode briskly through the forest, apparently untroubled by thoughts of any kind, for he hummed a merry tune as he walked.

He appeared to know the locality well, for without hesitation he turned now to the left, now to the right, and anon followed a scarcely visible footpath through the dense wood until at length he came to a halt before a mound of rock which rose abruptly at the further side of a small velvety glade.

Ivy mantled its sides in some places, while in others its grey and weather-beaten surface was bare and scarred with the ravages of many storms.

At the base of this rock, and leaning, as it were, against it, was constructed a rude hut, built chiefly of the trunks of trees felled in the neighbouring forest, and secured against the weather by having its crevices stuffed with moss mingled with clay. A rude emblem of the Holy Cross was carved upon the face of the rock as close as was possible to the hut, and at a little distance on the right hand a fountain of the purest water trickled down and bubbled musically over the stony bottom of a shallow channel.

Near this fountain were the ruins of a very small chapel, of which the roof had partly fallen in. The building, when entire, had never been much more than the size of an ordinary room, and had evidently been built in memory of some saintly personage, whose bones, perchance, rested beneath it.

The entrance to this ancient place of devotion was under a very low round arch, ornamented with those curious carvings which are peculiar to Saxon architecture.

It was, no doubt, the present abiding place of a hermit, and the traveller, who seemed to be well acquainted with the place, assailed the door of the hut with a cudgel of oak which he had picked up. with such good will that the forest echoed again to the sound of the blows.

"Pass on, whosoever you are," was the answer given to the knocks, by a deep, hoarse voice from within the hut, "and disturb not a recluse, who serves God and Saint Winifred in his evening devotions."

"A recluse, are you, eh?" exclaimed the young traveller, with a laugh. "And at your evening devotions? Well can I guess what form those devotions take. A venison pasty, a flagon of light wine—both of which I fain would share with you, for I am shrewdly hungry—serve you for missal, and—"

"Who and what are you?" quickly demanded the voice within the hut, cutting short the other's speech.

"An you will but open the door your curiosity will soon be satisfied, worthy Friar Tuck," was the rejoinder.

"By Saint Dunstan! but as you know me, I will e'en—"

The speaker broke off his remarks to withdraw the bolts and fling open the door of the hut. The blazing pine-knot which he held in his hand threw a lurid, flickering light upon the scene, and revealed the form and countenance of the jolly father confessor of Robin Hood's band.

Friar Tuck was a big, strongly-built man, with a round, red, good-humoured face and limbs like a Hercules. He was clad in a sackcloth gown and hood, girt about the middle with a rope of rushes.

For the space of a few seconds the

pair stood regarding each other in silence, which was broken by the monk, who burst forth with an exclamation of amazement and delight.

"By all the saints!" he cried; "if it is not Sir—"

The traveller checked him with a warning gesture.

"No names, good friend," he exclaimed; "not even here in the depths of the forest. 'Tis never possible to be certain that one of Sir Hugo's men may not be lurking within earshot. Strangely enough, I have already had an encounter with Sir Hugo himself, not an hour since. But the time is not yet ripe for me to make myself known."

Friar Tuck greeted the young man heartily, and as soon as he had entered the hut secured the door behind him.

"Thus are we secure from interruption," he said. "So you have escaped from those infidel followers of Mahoud, and once more returned to England. Have you been to Rutherford? But no, of course that could hardly be."

"You are the first to give me welcome," replied the traveller.

"Did you not say just now that you had met Sir Hugo? Did he recognise you?"

"No. But had he done so it would scarcely have been a welcome that he would have given me."

"Marry! 'tis true," admitted the burly friar. "But here am I talking, and forgetting the while that you are nigh famished. First attend to the wants of the inner man, and afterwards you can relate to me such of your adventures as you care to tell."

Having said this, he fixed his torch in a twisted branch of iron which served for a candlestick, and, going to the further side of the hut, produced from a cupboard a large venison pasty, richly browned on the top, some bread, and a huge leatheren bottle of wine—not the intoxicating beverage indulged in by the Normans, but a light wine distilled from fruits by the Saxon peasantry.

Setting these viands on the table, and refreshing the embers of the fire with some dry wood, Friar Tuck begged his guest to "fall to," an invitation which he had no occasion to repeat.

"Was I not right when I suggested

the form which your evening devotions were about to take?" said the traveller, with a sly smile.

Friar Tuck laughed heartily as he helped himself to a goodly portion of the pasty, but he made no immediate reply, and until the hunger of the pair was appeased there was no further attempt at conversation.

Then, when the repast was over, the Grey Traveller—as he chose to be called for the time being—related the story of his escape from a Saracen prison in the Holy Land, his adventures as he made his way through Europe in the guise of a wandering minstrel, and his final adventure of that very evening, when he had encountered Sir Hugo de Martival, and when the timely discharge of an arrow by an unseen friend had saved him from the stroke of a sword which might well have ended his life then and there.

"I will wager the shaft was sent by Robin Hood's own hand," exclaimed the friar. "He bears Sir Hugo no love, I do assure you. The Norman churl! What true knight would have raised his sword against an unarmed man, as he did against you? But he is a black villain at heart, that I know."

"And none know it better than I," said the traveller with a sigh. "Would that our gallant King Richard were home again, I should be able then to obtain justice."

"He will return, have no fear," exclaimed the friar. "But in the meantime I see no reason why we should not pass the remainder of the evening pleasantly. You said but a while since that you made your way through Austria and France as a wandering minstrel. That argues that you have an acquaintance with the harp."

"I can perform on it passing well."

"I would fain listen to a good roundelay," pursued the friar; "and since you have skill upon the harp, why, I can provide you with such an instrument."

Opening another cupboard, which among other things contained a couple of broadswords, a crossbow and bolts, a long-bow, and several sheaves of arrows, Friar Tuck produced therefrom a minstrel's harp and handed it to his guest.

"'Tis a Saxon ballad you would like to hear, is't not so?" asked the traveller.

"A ballad certainly," replied the friar. "Downright Saxon am I, and downright Saxon alone shall be sung in this hut."

The traveller's fingers swept over the strings of the harp, and a flood of melody filled the old wooden hut. Then he commenced to sing, in a rich full voice, a merry old song:

"The hottest horse will oft be cool,
The dullest will show fire;
The friar will often play the fool,
The fool will play the friar.
Hey derry-down ! Derry-down-dilly !"

They had got as far as the first "derry-down" chorus, in which Friar Tuck joined lustily, when the song was all at once interrupted by a loud knocking at the door of the hermitage.

The musician stopped short, and the friar, as he hastily removed the remains of the supper, exclaimed:

"By Saint Dunstan! here come more benighted guests. Perchance it may be some whose room we could better do with than their company. There are many such abroad."

The hammering at the door continued with increased violence, until it seemed like to be beaten from its hinges.

"What mad orisons are you indulging in at this hour of the night?" said a voice from without. "Open the door, Sir Priest, ere I batter it down."

"All's safe—all's right," said the friar to his companion. "'Tis our captain—Robin Hood."

Speedily unbolting his portal, Friar Tuck admitted his captain and Will Scarlet.

"So you have company," exclaimed Robin Hood, as he fixed his piercing eyes on the traveller. "'Tis not wise to give admittance to a stranger—"

"A stranger," interrupted the traveller, laying down his harp and advancing so that the light of the torch fell on his face. "Surely Robin Hood does not count me as a stranger. For the present I wish to remain nameless, but for all that I am going to crave your hospitality for a few days at least."

Robin Hood stared at the traveller for a few seconds, and then, with an exclamation of welcome, extended his hand, which the other gripped heartily.

"I recognise you now," cried the gallant outlaw. "But I knew not that you were back in England. Sith it is your wish to remain for the present unknown, I will take care that your name be never mentioned until you give permission. And I am truly glad to offer you such hospitality as our home in the green-wood can afford."

CHAPTER 2.

The Prior of Lyndhurst Pays Toll.

THE daylight had dawned upon the glades of the oak forest. The green boughs glittered with all their pearls of dew. From glade and coppice the blue smoke from several wood fires curled upwards above the treetops. The outlaws in their camp were preparing their breakfast.

An appetising smell permeated the air. Steaks of venison and freshly caught trout were being baked in specially constructed earth ovens.

When breakfast was over a dozen men rose from the greensward and strode off into the depths of the forest in different directions. They were the relief of the sentinels, who night and day kept watch and ward at different posts which formed a circle round the camp.

For the rules of the band were very strict, as it was needful they should be, and unceasing vigilance was an absolute necessity for their own safety, as they were always liable to attack.

The Sheriff of Nottingham had many a score to settle, which he would certainly pay if he were able; and there were others, Sir Hugo de Martival being one, who had sworn that the outlaws should be dispersed and their captain put to death as soon as ever they caught him.

But they found to their cost that it was a vow easier taken than kept.

Much the Miller's son, Little John, and Allan-a-Dale were three of those who had been on night duty and were now relieved. They entered the camp together.

"How now?" exclaimed Robin Hood, springing to his feet from beneath an oak-tree of enormous magnitude, where he had been reclining. This oak was known as the Trysting-tree. "How now, Little John? Have you anything to report?"

"Ay, that have I," replied the burly outlaw. "There should be good hope of booty this day, if it please Saint Nicholas to favour us."

"Devoutly spoken," laughed Robin Hood. "But from whom is the booty to be obtained?"

"The Prior of Lyndhurst travels this way with a large retinue, and a considerable store of gold and jewels with him. He is on his way to York, where 'tis said he intends to take up his residence, Lyndhurst being too near the borders of the forest to suit his taste."

"It is time he was eased of some of his ill-gotten wealth, which he has gathered by bribery, corruption, and oppression of the poor," exclaimed Allan-a-Dale. "Though he takes care that his name shall never appear. It is all done through his minions."

"He is worse than any Jew," said Much the Miller's son.

"From whom had you the news?" pursued Robin Hood.

"From the Jester of the Knight of Gilsland," was the reply.

"A trustworthy knave, who has on other occasions given us timely and serviceable news. He shall be rewarded."

"The prior's retinue," continued Little John, "will, as I understand, consist of twelve men, and methinks 'twill not be difficult to start them running."

"At what hour are they expected to pass by the Witches' Elm?" demanded the outlaw leader.

"Midday, as near as may be."

"Good. Everything shall be prepared then for the worthy churchman's reception."

Little John and the other sentinels who had just been relieved having made their reports, they fell to with considerable appetites on the viands prepared for their breakfast, after which they stretched themselves on some dry leaves

in the shade to snatch a few hours' repose after their night's vigil.

It was shortly after midday that the two outlaws on the lookout in the branches of a tree, from which they commanded a good view of the road through the forest towards York, espied the cavalcade which they were watching for.

The number of horsemen amounted to twelve, of whom the two who rode foremost seemed to be persons of considerable importance, and the others their attendants.

It was not difficult to ascertain the condition and character of one of these personages. He was obviously an ecclesiastic of high degree, judging by the materials of which his dress was composed. His mantle and hood were of the best Flemish cloth, and fell in ample folds around a somewhat corpulent person.

His face bore as little the marks of self-denial as his habit indicated contempt of worldly splendour. His features might have been called good, but for the expression of cunning self-satisfaction which ever lurked upon them.

In other respects his profession and situation had taught him a ready command over his countenance, which, when it so pleased him, or necessity compelled, he could contract to an expression of solemn austerity.

The worthy churchman rode upon a well-fed, ambling mule, whose furniture was highly decorated, and whose bridle, according to the fashion of the day, was ornamented with silver bells.

The companion of this church dignitary was a man of middle age, strong, with high, hawk-like features which had been burnt to a deep brown by long exposure to a tropical sun. His costume was that of a Knight Templar, and he had indeed but recently returned from the Crusades.

But notwithstanding the fact that he belonged to that famous order of military monks, those who knew Sir Rudolph Flambard best could have told many a dark tale concerning him, and of his evil, cruel, and rapacious nature.

"I would fain have had a much stronger escort," exclaimed the Prior of

Lyndhurst, as he glanced uneasily from side to side. "Methought, but a few minutes agone, that I heard the baying of a hound in the depths of the forest. There are those abroad whom it would please me better than I did not meet."

"The baying of a hound!" replied the Templar, with a contemptuous laugh. "Why should that trouble you? One of the keepers of the forest, no doubt, going his rounds with his dog."

"Pray Heaven it may be so," rejoined the churchman. "At the same time it is easy to remember that Robin Hood and his band of desperadoes haunt this part of Sherwood Forest, and not long since compelled the Sheriff of Nottingham to pay toll as he passed through, and he with an escort of a score of men."

"Cowardly knaves they must have been," said the Templar. "What have we to fear from a scurvy band of outlaws? I warrant if they show their faces before us we will give them the trouncing they deserve, and it will go hard if we don't hank their leader to the branch of a tree, an he has but the courage to come to hand-grips with us."

"You would not doubt his courage," replied the prior, "an you had ever met him in mortal combat, as perchance you may—— Saints preserve us! what is that?"

There was upon one side of the road down which they were riding, a thicket, strongly matted with green ivy, and, even in its winter state, impervious to the eye. Herein, all of a sudden, a bow sounded like a note of music. An arrow flew and quivered in the ground scarce a pace in front of the churchman's mule.

"What careless varlet has dared to shoot an arrow thus?" cried the Templar angrily. "Search him out. He shall be well chastised——"

"By whose hand?"

Robin Hood stepped out from amid the trees and confronted the haughty knight. The Prior of Lyndhurst, recognising him, reined quickly back with a cry of alarm; but the Templar, with a fierce exclamation of rage, spurred his steed forward as though to ride the outlaw down. The latter, however, stood firm, and with an arrow fitted to his bow drew the string back to his ear.

"Rein back, or you are a dead man, Sir Templar!" cried Robin Hood.

The Templar knight, chafing with impotent rage, had no choice but to obey the mandate. He had not thought fit to don his armour when he started on the journey, and it was now being carried by one of his henchmen, who led a pack-horse in the rear. Consequently his body was absolutely unprotected, and a clothyard shaft sent with unerring aim from a few paces distant would have gone almost through him. Against this formidable weapon he had but his sword, which, of course, was only of use at close quarters.

"Miscreant!" hissed the Templar. "You shall pay dearly for this."

"I have been threatened before," replied Robin Hood calmly. "But I still live."

By this time the retinue had closed up, and the knight, turning to his men, cried:

"Are we to be defied by an insolent varlet like this? Shall one man bar the road against a dozen men-at-arms? Ride him down and slay him."

"'Tis Robin Hood!" muttered one of the men.

"Cowards!" roared the knight. "Do you hang back?"

Forgetful now of his lack of armour, Sir Rudolph Flambard spurred his horse forward again, and his attendants, for very shame's sake, had to follow. To a stranger it would surely have appeared curious that they should hesitate to attack a solitary man, armed only with a bow and a sheaf of arrows. But the men-at-arms, at least, anticipated that there was a band of archers hidden among the trees.

Nor were they wrong.

A shrill whistle sounded from the thickets, and an instant later half a score of arrows hummed through the air.

Some were purposely aimed wide, but one was sent true, and an esquire of the Templar knight reeled out of his saddle and dropped to the earth badly wounded.

Then the grey-clad traveller, armed with sword and buckler, sprang into the roadway, followed by a score of archers in Lincoln green.

"Leave me to deal with the knight," he said to Robin Hood. "Do you settle with the others as best pleases you."

"And who may you be?" demanded the knight, as he turned furiously upon him.

"That you shall learn at a more fitting opportunity, Sir Randolph Flam-bard!" cried the other. "It is enough now that I am your enemy, as I am the enemy of all who claim friendship with Hugo de Martival. Defend yourself."

He thereupon attacked the Templar with such fury, and withal with such skill, that the latter had much ado to keep him at arm's length, notwithstanding the fact that he was mounted and the grey traveller was on foot.

In the meantime the fight was now in full swing between the outlaws and the men who composed the retinue of the Templar and the prior.

The retinue was well armed, and after a time the affray became a series of single combats.

Robin Hood, who had come first into the mêlée, was engaged by three Normans. Snatching a battle-axe from the hands of the first, he laid him low with a buffet on the pate with the flat of the axe-blade, but the other two coming upon him hotly he was fain to give ground before them.

One of these was a huge fellow seated on a powerful horse, and he was armed with a two-handed sword which he brandished like a switch.

Against this opponent, with his reach of arm and the length and weight of his weapon, Robin Hood was at considerable disadvantage; but by his wonderful activity he contrived to keep both the giant and his companion at bay.

Presently the huge blade flashed and descended, and the outlaw captain, leaping on one side and running in, swung his axe round and caught the fellow a terrible blow in the right side. A roar of agony responded, and the fellow tumbled off his horse into the dust, no more fit to take part in the fray.

The next moment Robin Hood was engaged upon more equal terms with his third antagonist. The issue was soon decided between them. With a deft upward sweep of the axe the outlaw

opped the head from his opponent's lance, and then gripping him by the near ankle hurled him clear from the saddle on to the road, where he lay prone beside his companion.

By this time the fight was over, and the outlaws were victorious. The Prior of Lyndhurst was a prisoner, several of his followers wounded, and the rest were fleeing for their lives.

The grey traveller was standing by the roadside with the point of his sword resting on the ground, but the Templar knight was nowhere to be seen.

"What has become of your antagonist?" asked Robin Hood of the traveller.

"In the middle of the fight he suddenly recognised me," was the reply, "and the knowledge thus acquired seemed to unnerve him. Swearing that the headsman should complete the task which he had—so badly—begun, he turned his horse suddenly and, leaping the brook, rode off into the forest."

"Leaving his companions to look after themselves," said Robin Hood with a laugh.

"Possibly he saw it was useless to continue the combat, and having no wish to become your prisoner, made off. I have never yet heard Sir Rudolph's courage doubted; nathless he is a man of evil and unscrupulous actions."

"We are well rid of him," pursued the outlaw captain. "I have no desire to be troubled with two prisoners of rank, for though we may obtain goodly ransom from the ease-loving churchman, I misdoubt me if we could have wrung aught from the Templar. Therefore in the end we should have had perforce to let him go, for 'twould be black shame to take the life of a defenceless prisoner."

The members of the band having secured the mules, palfreys, and pack-horses that had been abandoned, and given such attention as was possible to the wounded, now made their way back to the camp, the prisoner being led between Will Scarlet and the Miller's son.

The captive prior's features and manners exhibited a curious mixture of offended pride and bodily terror.

"How now, my masters?" he ex-

claimed, as they led him to the trysting-tree beneath which Robin Hood was standing. "What order is this among you? Know you not that I am a churchman, and you would thus roughly handle me? Let my palfreys be ordered forth, restore my mails, and tell down a fair sum to be expended in masses at the Abbey of Lyndhurst, and it may be you shall hear little more of this mad frolic."

"It grieves me to think," said Robin Hood with a slight smile, "that you have met with rough usage from any of my followers. Yet, holy father, it seems to me you are little the worse for it."

"Little the worse!" echoed the priest, encouraged by the mild tone of the outlaw leader. "What would you have, then? Here is a rascal"—he pointed to Will Scarlet—"who has menaced me with corporal punishment—nay, with death itself, an I pay not down three hundred crowns of ransom, to the boot of all the treasure of which I have already been despoiled. And of that I fear there is little which my servants have escaped with."

"I fear not," replied Robin Hood with mock gravity. "Yet it seems impossible that Will Scarlet can have thus treated a man of your bearing."

"It is true, nevertheless," said the prior. "He swore by his patron saint—an such a rogue can have a patron saint—that he would hang me up on the highest tree in the greenwood."

"Said he so? Nay, then, reverend father, I think you had better comply with his demands, for Will Scarlet is the very man to abide by his word when he has so pledged it."

"You do but jest," cried the astounded prior with a nervous laugh. "You cannot mean—"

"Of a truth I mean every word that I say," continued the outlaw chief. "You must pay a round ransom, Sir Prior, or your monastery is likely to know you no more."

"And that would be sad, indeed," put in Friar Tuck, who having once more donned a friar's frock over his suit of Lincoln green which he had worn during the fray, had now appeared upon the scene.

"What profane mummery is this?" exclaimed the Prior of Lyndhurst angrily. "Are you indeed of the church—"

"Ay, that am I," replied Tuck.

"Then it were a good deed to show me how I may escape from these men's hands, for one churchman will surely help another."

"Truly, reverend father," answered Friar Tuck, "I fear I cannot be of great assistance to you; but you are nevertheless welcome to my advice. I know but one mode in which you may escape, and that is by complying with the demands of these merry men."

"Well, sith it must be—it must," exclaimed the prior sullenly. "'Tis not the first time I have had to hold a candle to the devil. But you must let me off lightly in the matter of ransom. What sum am I to pay for travelling along the road without three score men-at-arms at my back?"

"Not a penny less than three hundred crowns," replied Robin Hood. "The Abbey of Lyndhurst is rich, and you can well afford that sum. Moreover, the half of your ransom will be distributed among the poor and needy, that being our custom, so you will have the knowledge that you are doing a good action in making the payment."

"Three hundred crowns, my masters!" cried the prior. "Where am I to get such a sum? I shall need to sell the very candlesticks from the altar at Lyndhurst to raise it, and it will be necessary for that purpose that I go to Lyndhurst myself. You may retain as pledges my two henchmen."

"That will be but a blind trust," exclaimed Friar Tuck. "An the captain takes my advice he will retain you and send the henchmen to fetch the ransom."

"'Tis excellent advice," said Robin Hood, "and I take it. And now, Sir Prior, all you have to do is to give your men the necessary written authority to procure the sum I have named, and methinks that the altar candlesticks would be safe enough, even though you had to pay three times that sum for your ransom."

Seeing that there was no help for it the Prior of Lyndhurst, with many a

groan, gave accordingly an order, sealed with his signet, to the seneschal of the abbey, requiring him to furnish the bearers with the sum of three hundred crowns.

Armed with this scroll, the henchmen set forth, accompanied by two tall foresters who were to be their guides through the woods.

In due time they returned with the ransom money, and the Prior of Lyndhurst was allowed to go on his way, leaving Robin Hood free to deal with other matters concerning the welfare of the Grey Traveller.

CHAPTER 3.

Robin Hood in Rutherford Castle.

SEATED somewhat apart from the other members of the band, who were gathered round the camp-fires engaged in various occupations, from bow-mending to cooking a steak of venison, Robin Hood and his nameless guest, the Grey Traveller, conversed in low tones.

"It is better that I should make the venture," the outlaw chief was saying, "than that you should do so. You need not fear for me; I have penetrated to the lair of the wolf before now and escaped unharmed, and I may well do so again. You will be able to strike all the harder when the proper hour comes an you will but remain unknown for a little while longer. And forget not that I also have a score to settle with Sir Hugo de Martival."

"It is perhaps best as you say," responded the nameless traveller; "but it irks me that you should venture your life on my account——"

"Did you not once venture yours on mine?" interrupted the outlaw. "An we are to make a reckoning of it, we shall be but quits in the end."

"Have it, then, as you wish," said the nameless one. "You are a true friend, Robin Hood, and I hope the day is not far distant when you will be restored to your rightful position."

"Enough!" returned the outlaw, laying his hand on the other's arm. "We will not speak of that. It may, or may not happen; but in the meantime I am happy in my greenwood kingdom, and never a monarch had more reason to be

proud of his subjects than I of mine. But of this venture? You would wish a message carried to Lady Editha, Sir Hugo's ward?"

The young man flushed slightly and nodded his head.

"Of a surety," he replied. "Bid her keep good heart when you tell her that I have returned in safety, and say also that I shall be ever ready to come to her assistance should she be in any danger."

"As she well may be in that hornets' nest," exclaimed Robin Hood.

"Assure her of my constant devotion, and that I have ever been a true knight," concluded the traveller.

"She will scarcely need such assurance," said Robin Hood with a smile. "Yet I will give it to her."

"And when will you start?"

"This very night. There is danger in delay."

"Ay, danger! Danger lurks at every turn," said the stranger bitterly. "'Tis a nice welcome home to my own country. Yet I am used to dangers; my life has been passed amid them, so I should not complain."

"Life would be tame indeed were there no dangers to confront, or obstacles to overcome," rejoined Robin Hood. "But see! Will Scarlet, Little John, and the others await us. Allan-a-Dale is about to troll a roundelay, and we must pass an hour with them ere I set forth."

* * * *

The River Don was a wide, sluggish, clayey stream, starting from its source in the Fen country, and in that part of its course which took it through Sherwood Forest, winding its way among a number of willow-covered, marshy islets.

It was somewhat of a dingy stream, but under the clear light of the stars it became almost beautiful.

A creek ran up to meet the path, and close under the bank the ferryman's hut lay snugly. It was of wattle and clay, and the moss grew thick upon the roof.

Robin Hood went to the door and opened it. Within, upon a rude couch of leaves and straw, the ferryman lay stretched out asleep—a tall, lean man, with a face tanned the colour of leather.

"Rouse you! rouse you!" cried Robin Hood, shaking the man by the shoulder. "I would be across."

Wat o' the Ferry rubbed his eyes sleepily, and, rising slowly to his feet, confronted his would-be passenger.

"Who is it wants to cross the river at this time o' night?" he growled. "Know you not—"

"I am Robin Hood," interposed the outlaw. "Did you not recognise me?"

The ferryman scrutinised him closely, and then burst into a laugh.

"Marry! but how should I know you in such a disguise?" he exclaimed. "But the voice—I recognise your voice right easily."

"'Tis to be hoped that others will not," muttered Robin Hood under his breath.

He was disguised as a friar, in frock and cowl, the latter being well drawn over his head so as to conceal his features.

"So you are for the ferry, Master Robin Hood?" exclaimed the man. "Let me warn you that danger lurks beyond; and if you purpose visiting the Castle of Rutherford——"

"Stop your prating, Wat, and ferry me across," interrupted Robin Hood.

The ferryman grumbly undid his boat and pushed it forth into the deep water as soon as Robin Hood had stepped on board.

"You are in haste to get forward," said Wat. "See that you are not in greater haste to get back. I did but wish to warn you that the scouts of Sir Hugo are abroad."

"I will take care to avoid them," replied the outlaw. "But I thank you for your warning, friend. Now, bend me your back, for I do not wish to tarry here."

They were soon at the mouth of the creek, and the view opened up and down the river. There was an island near midstream. Willows were nodding from its slippery, clay banks, and tall weeds waving in the night breeze.

They pulled some distance down the river, turned the lower end of the island, and came softly down a channel next the opposite bank.

"I must land you yonder among the rushes," said the ferryman; "for I have

a shrewd suspicion that some of the scouts I spoke of are watching amid the trees higher up."

"They are not on the lookout for me."

"That may be. Still, an they see you——"

Wat's speech was interrupted by a great shout from among the willows on the river bank, and sounds followed as of men breasting roughly through the wood.

"A murrain on them!" cried the ferryman. "They have seen us! They are Sir Hugo's men, I'll warrant. Bend me your bow, good Robin Hood, and let the first one that shows himself have a cloth-yard shaft!"

"Peace, fool!" said Robin Hood. "Would a holy friar carry a long-bow and a sheaf of arrows, think you?"

"You are not unarmed?" cried Wat in consternation.

The outlaw chief laughed.

"Beneath my friar's gown I have a hunting-knife and a short axe," he replied. "I should not venture into the wolf's lair without some preparation of the sort."

The boat ran into the thick rushes and grounded upon the soft, clayey bank. Robin Hood leaped out and pushed his way to firm ground.

At that instant a couple of men, armed with cross-bows and short spears, appeared upon the shore.

"Who goes?" shouted one of them. "Wat Ferryman, who goes?"

"'Tis but a holy friar," replied the ferryman, "who craved a passage across that he might be set upon his way."

"'Tis passing late for a holy man to be abroad," exclaimed the fellow. "We must needs have sight of him, for my lord of Rutherford hath ordered that all who pass on this road shall be questioned."

"And by what right does Sir Hugo—who calls himself lord of Rutherford—give such an order?" demanded Robin Hood, stepping forth and confronting the two men.

"By my halidom, Sir Shaveling," exclaimed the man-at-arms, with a gruff laugh, "an you dare to question the orders of Sir Hugo de Martival, 'tis like to go ill with you, priest though

you be. Before you go further you will have to render some account of yourself to us—whither you go, whence you have come, and why you should choose the night hours in which to travel."

"Those matters concern me alone," replied Robin Hood. "I am a free man and a friar in holy orders, and answer for my actions to no man. That is my reply to your questions, and whether you like it or not I shall now proceed on my way."

"That you will not, you scurvy priestling!"

The man-at-arms made a step forward and clapped his hand on Robin Hood's shoulder, as though to detain him. But a surprise lay in store for him. The pretended friar shook him off easily, and with one tremendous buffet on the side of the head sent him reeling into the river, where he would likely have smothered in the mud had his companion not come to his assistance.

Meanwhile, Wat o' the Ferry, deeming he was best out of such dangerous company, pushed his boat off again and rowed back to the other side of the river, where his hut was.

By the time the man-at-arms had been extricated from his unpleasant predicament, and recovered his crossbow and spear from the mud, the friar was out of sight.

Robin Hood pursued his way without further interruption until the battlements of Rutherford Castle came in sight, and then he gave pause. For, notwithstanding the late hour—it was long past curfew, but Sir Hugo paid little heed to that—sounds of revelry were borne on the wind from the castle.

"What betides?" muttered Robin Hood. "Sir Hugo de Martival keeps high wassail. What should be the reason of the festivities? Perchance, merely some guests whom he desires to honour. Well, 'tis so much the better, for among the crowd I have a greater chance of passing unnoticed."

A short distance further on—about the length that a sturdy archer might shoot a cloth-yard shaft—and Robin Hood came to the portal of the castle. There, arrayed in the cowl and frock of the friar, and having his knotted cord

twisted round his middle, he stood, while the warder in charge of the gate demanded of him his business.

"Pax vobiscum!" answered Robin Hood. "I am a poor brother of the Order of St. Dominic, and having wandered from my path, do but crave a night's shelter and a little food. In the morning I shall resume my journey."

"Well, all and sundry are being made welcome at the castle this night," said the warder; "though, in good sooth, save our own confessor, who is at this moment busy with the platter, there are not many of thy feather who gain admittance here. And though 'tis open house to-night, yet must I get permission ere admitting other guests."

"I prithee gain that permission, then," pursued Robin Hood, "for I am tired and hungry."

"Gramercy," said the warder, but if I come to shame for leaving my post upon your errand—for my master loves not shaveling priests—I will try whether a friar's hood be proof against the tap of a quarter-staff."

Having thus delivered himself, the warder walked off.

After a short interval he returned and, flinging open the wicket-gate, bade the supposed priest enter.

"'Tis easy to find your way to the kitchen," said the warder, "where you will be duly looked after in the matter of food. As to lodging, methinks you will find that a more difficult matter, as the castle is already well filled with guests of all sorts and conditions."

"A few handfuls of straw upon the ground is all that I require," was the reply, as Robin Hood hastened away from the entrance towards the central keep.

As the warder had said, the castle was well filled with guests, for, in addition to the ordinary retainers, there was a crowd of people of all descriptions collected there, many of them attracted by mere greed on hearing that the castle was thrown open on that night, and that food and drink were to be dispensed freely to all comers.

For a certain lavish hospitality was the fashion of the time, and Sir Hugo de Martival, from motives of policy, followed the fashion on occasions.

Moreover, this was the day of the coming of age of his ward Editha, and it was meet that high festival should be held.

He had hoped that he should have been able to announce the betrothal of the fair Editha to his boon companion, Sir Guy de Wyville, an arrangement having been come to between the two that if her guardian could persuade—or force—Editha to accept Sir Guy as a husband, one third of her fortune should be handed over by the latter to Sir Hugo. But this contemptible plotting seemed likely to be frustrated, for the fair Editha could not be persuaded to accept a husband other than the one of her own choice.

And Sir Guy de Wyville, Knight of Tunstall, a man of dissolute habits and evil ways, was by no means to her liking. However, if persuasion failed, Sir Hugo determined to bring pressure to bear on her.

Robin Hood had made his way first of all to the courtyard—for he had no particular desire to enter the kitchen—and was warming himself at a great fire that was built near the centre of it.

A mixed crowd were assembled there—jugglers, mountebanks, men-at-arms, archers, and huntsmen. With these Robin engaged in conversation, gleaned such information from them as might prove useful in his forthcoming adventure.

At last his eye, which ever darted keen glances hither and thither, lit upon a little procession which was crossing the courtyard in an oblique direction towards the main door of the castle.

Two ladies led the way, and were followed by a pair of waiting-women and four stout men-at-arms.

"The younger and more beautiful of the two is the Lady Editha," thought Robin Hood. "I must gain speech with her by some means or other. It should not be difficult, for ladies have need of a father-confessor at times, and as the one attached to the household is now at the festive board, it may well happen that a stranger shall be sent for."

At the great door of the castle the four men-at-arms had ceased to follow, and the ladies were now mounting the broad stone staircase, under no better

escort than that of the two waiting-women.

Robin Hood, slipping away from the motley company, managed to follow close behind the ladies unchallenged. The stairway was but dimly lighted, and in parts was dark almost as the night itself.

It was only on the landings that torches were set, flaring in iron holders. Down the long, tapestried corridors lamps burned here and there, and where a door stood open the daring outlaw could look in upon arras-covered walls and rush-strewn floors, glowing in the light of the wood-fires, for fires were necessary, as the night airs were chill.

Two flights of stairs had been negotiated, and once, during the ascent, the younger lady had looked back keenly at the friar. But he, keeping his eyes lowered, and affecting the humility that suited his disguise, had not given any sign that he observed her scrutiny. On arrival at the third landing the party separated, the younger lady following a corridor to the left, alone, while the other, with the waiting-maids, turned down the corridor on the right hand.

Robin Hood mounted with a swift foot and, standing in the deep shadow of a recess, watched the three women until they entered a chamber which opened on to the corridor.

"'Tis well!" thought Robin Hood. "It will go hard an I cannot obtain an interview with the Lady Editha now, so I but find a serving-wench who will carry a message for me."

Just at that moment a hand was laid lightly on his shoulder, and he turned swiftly to find himself face to face with the very person he was anxious to see—a demure and pretty serving-maid. She appeared to be startled and frightened on seeing Robin Hood's features.

"Methought you were the confessor of Rutherford," she said; "but I see you are a stranger. What do you here, sir?"

"Fair maid," replied Robin Hood gallantly, "I would fain have speech with the Lady Editha, but knew not how I might get a message carried to her. Now my doubts are resolved, for surely you——"

"Surely I know my place better than to carry a message from a stranger monk to my lady," interrupted the maid pertly, for she had now recovered from her momentary alarm.

"Nevertheless, I believe you will do my behest," said the outlaw as he pressed a silver-piece into her hand.

"Beshrew me!" exclaimed the serving-maid, glancing at the supposed friar shrewdly, "but you are the strangest monk I ever yet have met. 'Tis seldom even that a prior or abbot bestows largesse, but for a curtail friar to do so is nigh upon a miracle. I fear me you are no friar at all."

"'Tis an age of miracles, fair maid," laughed Robin Hood. "And now I would have you take this message to your lady: Tell her that I have tidings of the Grey Knight, and that I crave audience with her, if she can spare me a few moments."

"The Grey Knight! Assuredly your message shall be delivered right quickly. Await my return here."

And with that the maid ran lightly off down the corridor.

It was not long ere she returned and motioned Robin Hood to follow her.

"My lady will see you," she said, "but the interview must be brief, for her actions are ever spied upon. Tread warily and softly, Sir Monk, for if your mission is suspected 'twill be an ill hour for us, and your head will be as good as off your shoulders."

"My head has been in the lion's mouth before," said Robin Hood, "and still 'tis firm enough on my body."

"'Twill not be an the lion snaps his teeth together," retorted the maid.

At the end of the short passage was an ascent of three steps, which led to the apartment of the Lady Editha. Here, as in the other rooms into which Robin Hood had looked, a fire blazed upon the hearth, but in addition three silver candelabra, holding great waxen torches, illuminated the chamber.

The walls were covered with embroidered hangings, on which different coloured silks, interwoven with gold and silver threads, had been employed, representing the sports of hawking and hunting. The seats had purple coverings of sendal, and one which was

higher than the rest was accommodated with a footstool of ivory, curiously carved.

The Lady Editha, with one attendant, who was standing behind her, was seated on the raised chair. Robin Hood bowed low and gracefully before her.

"Holy Friar," said the lady, "in the message you sent in to me you referred to one as the Grey Knight, in whom I take a great interest. You have tidings of him, you say. Tell me, where and in what condition did you leave him of whom you spoke? For if you have tidings of him, it must surely be that you have seen, or held converse with him. I dreamed that he had returned to England, but I dreamed also that he was in danger—"

"In both instances your dream was correct, lady," said Robin Hood. "He is in England, and if his enemies find out that he is in the country, assuredly he is in danger. But at present he is safe, for he is now a guest of Robin Hood and his merry men in the forest of Sherwood, and 'twas in their camp that I left him but shortly after sunset."

Lady Editha put her hand to her heart and turned suddenly pale; but she quickly recovered herself.

"Heaven send he prevail against his enemies," she murmured. "Would that we could meet, if only for a few minutes, but 'tis impossible, I fear, at present. He must not venture here, even in disguise."

"An you care to take a ride into the forest," replied Robin Hood, "I can promise that you shall see him. And you need have no fear, for you shall have a guard of a score of trusty foresters from the Don Ferry to the outlaw's camp."

"And who are you that are able to make me such a promise?" asked the lady eagerly.

Robin Hood bent forward and whispered two words in her ear. The lady started, and a look, first of admiration, then of fear, came into her eyes. The fear, be it said, was for the outlaw's safety.

"If you are discovered within these walls," she cried, "it will mean your death. Go at once, I pray you! You

are noble, you are brave to rashness, to venture here for my sake, for the sake of him who is honoured by your friendship; but if you come to harm——”

“Have no fear, lady,” said Robin Hood. “But when I go I must surely carry back a message.”

Lady Editha drew a ring from her finger, and after pressing it to her lips handed it to the outlaw while a deep blush showed upon her cheeks.

“Give him that,” she whispered; “but let none others see it.”

“I will guard it with my life,” said Robin Hood.

At this juncture the serving wench who had spoken with him on the stairs came hurriedly into the apartment.

“Sir Hugo de Martival is ascending the stairs with men-at-arms at his heels,” she whispered. “He is coming here! I know not whether he suspects. What are we to do? This friar must be hidden, for he cannot descend to the courtyard without being seen.”

“Quick, then!” cried Lady Editha. “Lose not your wits, good wench. Through this door into the next chamber; it is unoccupied.”

She pushed open a door, and Robin Hood stepped through into the adjoining apartment. For a moment he paused.

“Lady,” he said, “it is for your sake that I consent to hide. For, believe me, had I my choice, I would far sooner meet this proud baron and his men-at-arms, and let them feel the weight of the good axe which I carry, even though I am facing the wolf in his own lair.”

“No, no; it must not be!” exclaimed the Lady Editha. “There must be no bloodshed. Quick! close the door!”

He was pushed rather unceremoniously by the serving wench into the next chamber, and the door closed upon him just as Sir Hugo knocked loudly at the outer portal, asking admittance, as he desired speech with his ward.

Robin Hood, in the meantime, looked round the dimly lighted room in which he found himself, and which was evidently an apartment seldom used, as it was but scantily furnished. A second door gave access to the corridor, and he was considering whether he might not be able to evade the men-at-arms by

passing out that way when his reflections were somewhat strangely disturbed.

The silence of the chamber was suddenly broken by the sound of somebody walking with extreme precaution on the further side of the wall on his left, as he faced the door. Soon after he heard a curious creaking noise behind the arras, as though a panel was being moved in the oak partition—which, indeed, was the case—and he just had time to slip through a division in the tapestry when the arras was pulled cautiously on one side, and a hunchback, with a sallow, scowling face, a shock head of hair, and long muscular arms, pushed first his head and then his body into the chamber.

The deformed being had a dagger in his hand, and with this he went round the room, striking here and there upon the hangings, and, as evil luck would have it, the point at one of these thrusts grazed Robin Hood’s shoulder.

The outlaw moved involuntarily, and a moment later the hunchback spy had torn the hangings down.

“Ho, ho! as I thought,” chuckled the spy. “The holy friar! Come forth, and we will see what Sir Hugo de Martival has to say to your presence.”

Robin Hood did not hesitate to obey this summons, as the fellow called out so loudly that he feared the baron might hear him in the next chamber. The creature must be silenced.

Swiftly the outlaw prince sprang forward and seized the hunchback by the throat. The latter, unable now to cry out, stabbed viciously at him with his dagger; but although he managed to inflict two rather nasty flesh-wounds they were neither of them serious.

After that the struggle did not last a great length of time, and it was carried out in silence, for Robin Hood had no desire to speak, and the hunchback could not.

For a while they swayed to and fro, somewhat handicapped by the folds of the arras, which had got somehow wrapped about them.

Suddenly they slipped and fell. The hunchback uttered a deep groan, and a shudder convulsed his body. Then he lay still, and as Robin Hood rose to

his feet he saw a dark red stain slowly spreading itself over the floor.

The spy had fallen on his own dagger, which had pierced his heart.

But although the struggle had been conducted in deadly silence so far as their voices were concerned, there was yet the noise of their falling on the floor, and the sound of the tearing of the hangings. These sounds came to the ears of the men-at-arms in the corridor, and they at once burst into the chamber. There they saw the dead hunchback lying prone, and a friar—as they supposed—standing over him.

"What have we here?" demanded one of the fellows, a subordinate officer. "Seize me yonder monk; there is treachery afoot."

Two of the men advanced to carry out this order, but in an instant Robin Hood's short-handled, broad-bladed axe flashed in the light.

The men hung back at this, but soon others pressed forward to the assistance of their companions, and although Robin Hood fought desperately he was beaten down and overpowered by numbers. The uproar of the combat brought Sir Hugo into the chamber.

"How now?" he cried angrily. "What is the meaning of this brawling?"

"We have a spy among us," replied the officer. "We found the hunchback lying dead, and this friar standing over him. And, by the mass! never before have I met a friar who can fight so well as he did. A man of peace, forsooth! More fitted is he to be a man-at-arms."

The cowl had been torn back from Robin's head, and his features were revealed. Sir Hugo de Martival scrutinised him keenly, and then gave vent to a fierce exclamation of triumph.

"You have secured a good prize here," cried the baron. "Know you not who it is? None other than the pestilent leader of the outlaws—Robin Hood!"

"Robin Hood!"

"Ay, none other. Away with him to the dungeon, and see to it that he escapes not, or your heads will answer for it. I will question him to-morrow, for, methinks, he has not come hither on his own errand."

"Little care I either for your dungeon

or your questions," said Robin Hood, facing Sir Hugo boldly. "What errand I have come on you may know in good time, but the information will not be given in answer to your questions. And I may remind you that if you take my life your own head will rest none too safely on your shoulders."

Sir Hugo de Martival made no reply, but gave a sign to the men-at-arms to remove their prisoner, and a few minutes later Robin Hood was cast into a foul and damp cell beneath the castle keep.

CHAPTER 4.

How the Outlaw King was Rescued

"He should be back by this time. I like not this long absence. 'Twas yesterday e'en he went forth, and now night grows on apace. A full day and more has he been away, and yet the word that he left was that he would return to camp by sunrise this morning."

Thus spoke Will Scarlet as he fitted a new string to his bow. The subject of his discourse was Robin Hood, whose prolonged absence was beginning to cause his followers some uneasiness.

"He left word when he might return," said Little John gruffly, "but did he also leave word where he was going to?"

"Nay. That did he not."

"Our guest of the grey tunic can give us that information an he will," put in Friar Tuck. "See! here he comes. I will e'en put the question to him."

The Grey Traveller—as he was usually called by the outlaws—came striding across the glade towards them with his long, swinging, athletic step. He seemed to divine their thoughts, for when he had joined the little group he said anxiously:

"Has Robin Hood not returned yet?"

Friar Tuck shook his head.

"It is of him we were speaking," he replied, "and we fear that some mishap hath befallen him. An we knew whither he had gone we would set forth to find him."

"He deemed it best that none should know," said the Grey Traveller. "It was on a matter that concerned only myself and the lady to whom I am

betrothed. But the time for secrecy has gone by. If he is in danger, 'tis meet that I should be the first to render him assistance. 'Twas to the Castle of Rutherford that he went."

"Then if he has fallen into the power of Sir Hugo de Martival, he is in deadly peril indeed!" cried Will Scarlet.

"Marry, that is he!" exclaimed Friar Tuck. "One of us must haste to the village, for an he be captured the news will have got beyond the castle gates by this time."

"Make not so sure of that," interrupted Little John. "Sir Hugo de Martival would keep the matter secret until he had put Robin to death, for fear of his rescue being attempted."

"The Norman cur!" growled Friar Tuck. "Mine be the task, in any case, to find out."

"Nay; Robin went disguised as a friar, and the monk's cowl and frock has brought him ill-luck," growled Little John. "They will be suspicious of all friars now at Rutherford Castle. The task—"

"Is mine," broke in the Grey Traveller, with a quiet air of authority, which would not brook dispute.

"Why, whom have we here?" said Will Scarlet, as the sound of a heavy footstep was heard crashing through the undergrowth. "No woodman, I'll dare swear, who makes his presence known while he is yet out of sight."

They all turned in the direction of the sounds.

"Wat o' the Ferry!" cried Friar Tuck.

It was indeed that worthy boatman, and as he staggered into the glade and sank panting on to a log, they all gathered round him.

"Ill news, my masters!" he exclaimed as soon as he had recovered breath. "The gallant Robin Hood has fallen into the hands of Sir Hugo de Martival, and is even now lying helpless in the lowest dungeon. And 'tis said that the baron has sworn that at midday to-morrow your noble chief shall be hanged from the highest battlements of Rutherford Castle."

"Praise be to the saints he is still alive!" said Friar Tuck. "Midday to-morrow, say you? And to be hanged

from the battlements? Nay, then, it will go hard if we cannot rescue him. He must needs be taken up from the dungeon, and there lies our hope."

"I see not that it make any difference," exclaimed Little John. "We have to get into the castle ere Robin Hood can be got out."

"A truce to this talk," said Will Scarlet. "Send off scouts to warn every man of the band to meet at the trysting-oak at daybreak to-morrow. We will have Robin out of Rutherford or burn the castle about the Norman's ears."

"An any harm comes to Robin Hood," said the Grey Traveller, "I will take such vengeance on Sir Hugo de Martival that it shall be spoken of with bated breath from here to Palestine!"

He turned to Friar Tuck.

"The time has come for me to act," he said. "I go now to procure a steed and armour at a place that I wot of. To-morrow at daybreak I shall be at the trysting-oak. Meanwhile, you may inform your comrades, my generous hosts, of my real name and station. The Grey Traveller I shall be no longer; but henceforth, until I have won back my patrimony, I shall be known as the Grey Knight."

With a parting wave of his hand he turned and strode away across the glade, and was presently lost to sight amid the dark aisles of the forest trees.

"His name and station! Who, then, is he?" demanded Little John.

"Sir Arthur Melton, the true knight of Rutherford!" replied the friar. "Beshrew me, but one may hope that we shall not find it necessary to burn down the castle, as 'tis his by right; though he was foully despoiled of it and his lands by Prince John while he was still a lad of but nineteen years, and they were given to Sir Hugo de Martival."

"So! Is that, then, the Arthur Melton whom I taught as a lad to draw the bow and instructed in all the mysteries of woodcraft?" exclaimed Will Scarlet. "Truly, I must have been blind not to have recognised him. But methought he had died in the Holy Land."

"'Twas no fault of Sir Hugo's that he did not," replied Friar Tuck. "For the

Norman cur fears him, knowing that if King Richard ever returns—which Heaven grant he may—stern justice will be dealt out."

"By the mass!" growled Little John, "but justice will be dealt out much sooner an the saints are on our side. Has it not been said that Sir Arthur's father was foully killed by this same Sir Hugo?"

"'Tis said so, for he has ever hated them, because they are Saxons," replied Will Scarlet, "and also because he has coveted the lands of Rutherford from the first. An justice could be done 'twould be Sir Hugo whom we should see hanging at the castle battlements to-morrow."

* * * * *

Dawn had broken, and the red-gold light that precedes the rising of the sun was already tinging the blue of the eastern sky.

Three hundred archers and crossbowmen, every available member of Robin Hood's band from far and near, strengthened by many sympathisers, had assembled before the walls of Rutherford Castle, and were preparing for the assault.

They were led by a knight clad in grey armour, mounted on a grey warhorse. The device on his shield was a black eagle. This knight, as the reader will no doubt guess, was he who had hitherto been known as the Grey Traveller, Sir Arthur Melton, the rightful Baron of Rutherford.

Meanwhile, the castle had been hastily prepared to resist this unexpected onslaught, although, for the matter of that, like all feudal castles of that disturbed period, it was always in a state of defence. Drawbridges had been hastily raised, portcullises lowered, and men-at-arms stationed at every point of vantage on the battlements.

Suddenly the shrill blast of a horn echoed upon the morning air. It was the signal for assault.

At once it was answered by a flourish of the Norman trumpets from the battlements, which, mingling with the deep and hollow clang of a species of metal kettledrum in use at the time, retorted in notes of defiance to the challenge of the enemy.

The shouts of both parties augmented the din when once the assault had begun, the assailants crying, "St George for Merry England!" and the Normans answering them with cries of "En avant de Martival!" "Wyville a la rescousse!" according to the warcries of the commanders.

The archers now advanced from the bordering woods, the foremost bearing huge shields and defences made of planks, while those who followed discharged their arrows from behind this movable cover, and, being so protected, could take cooler and steadier aim.

But although the attack was pressed forward with vigour, it was met by a desperate defence on the part of the besieged.

Robin Hood's "Merry Men," trained by their woodland pastimes to the most effective use of the long-bow, shot such a continuous cloud of arrows with such marvellous precision that no point at which a defender could show the least part of his person escaped their cloth-yard shafts.

By this heavy discharge, which continued as thick and fast as hail, many of the garrison were very soon slain or wounded. But confident in their armour of proof, and in the cover which the walls of the castle afforded, the followers of Sir Hugo de Martival and Sir Guy de Wyville showed an obstinacy in defence proportioned to the fury of the attack, and replied with the discharge of their large cross-bows, as well as with their long-bows, slings, and other weapons, doing a considerable amount of damage among the assailants with their missiles.

But, after all, archery alone could not prevail against the stone walls of a castle, as the Grey Knight knew full well, and he presently called Will Scarlet to his side to arrange an assault upon the barriers.

"Scarlet," said he, "we must press right on and carry the castle by pure force of arms, else we may remain outside until the ground is sown as thick with arrows as quills on a porcupine. Leave only fifty of your men to sustain the attack with long-bow and cross-bow, and let the remainder try the strength of their axes upon the palisades.

This counsel was at once acted upon, and, led by the Grey Knight himself, who wielded a great battle-axe with good effect, his high, grey plume floating abroad over the throng like a pennon, a swarm of foresters commenced to pull down the piles and palisades, and hew down the barriers with their axes.

Soon a breach was made, and the besiegers rushed through it, to be met, however, by a party of the defenders, headed by Sir Guy de Wyville. And so fierce was the onslaught of the latter that for a time it seemed as though the archers were like to be beaten back.

But they were quickly rallied by the Grey Knight, who rode straight at Sir Guy and dealt him a blow on the helm with his battle-axe that nearly unhorsed him.

However, as the Grey Knight was hemmed in by a number of men-at-arms, his opponent was able to recover himself ere he could press home the attack.

With loud cries of "St. George for Merry England!" "Robin Hood!" "Robin Hood!" the archers hurled themselves upon their foes again and fairly swept the men-at-arms before them, flinging them pell-mell one upon the other until they had forced them right back against the outer walls. Then the two knights met once more.

"You still herd with the wolves, Sir Guy de Wyville!" cried the Grey Knight. "Well, a vulture and a wolf should hunt well together."

He referred to the respective crests of Sir Guy and Sir Hugo de Martival, that of the former being a vulture and the latter the head of a wolf.

"A wolf's fangs and a vulture's talons are to be dreaded," retorted the other, as he made a thrust at his foe with his sword, which the other warded off with great dexterity.

"Only when they can attack a defenceless foe," said the Grey Knight.

At the same time he forced his steed forward, and, swinging his battle-axe aloft, dealt a stroke on the head of his antagonist, which, glancing from the polished helmet, lighted with violence scarce abated on the chamfron of the steed, and Sir Guy de Wyville rolled on the ground, both horse and man equally stunned by the fury of the blow.

A tremendous roar of applause went up from the foresters on witnessing this feat, and they pressed forward to the attack with renewed vigour.

"By Saint Dunstan!" exclaimed Friar Tuck, "but the Grey Knight is a shrewd hitter, and methinks that Sir Guy de Wyville will not be in condition to don armour again for some time to come!"

And Friar Tuck himself, with his face as red as the setting sun, and with as happy a look as though he was attacking a venison pasty instead of a swarm of stalwart men-at-arms, was laying about him with his quarter-staff with such good will that his opponents were tumbling over in all directions like so many ninepins.

He was ably seconded by Little John, and these two formidable fighters soon cleared a lane through the ranks of the enemy, and, with the other yeomen at their heels, soon won up the outer walls. But the postern had been closed, and those of the garrison who remained outside had perforce to surrender at discretion.

However, a closed postern was but a small matter to Little John and Friar Tuck. The latter pointed to a huge beam of wood which had been hurled down from the summit of the outer wall.

"This should serve us," he said.

"Right well," answered Little John with a grin.

Between them they picked up the mighty beam, careless of the missiles which fell in a shower all round them, and then dealt such thundering blows upon the gate that they were heard above all the din of the battle.

"Lustily, good friar!" roared Little John. "Again, and yet again! See! the postern shakes!"

It did, indeed, and more. There was a terrific crash, and the gate was splintered into atoms.

"Well done, Friar Tuck! Gramercy, Little John, but the castle itself could ill stand against such blows!" cried the Grey Knight.

"Forward! forward! To the rescue of Robin Hood!"

The gallant outlaws rushed up to the battlements of the outer wall, and, after a short, fierce, hand-to-hand struggle

with the defenders, overmastered them, hurling some into the moat, cleaving down others with hunting-knives and axes, and finally forcing the whole of them to surrender.

But the keep, the inner and strongest part of the castle, had yet to be won. There was a drawbridge over the inner moat, and Sir Hugo de Martival, who was conducting the defence of the keep, appeared at the portcullis, urging his men to raise it quickly. But, although they essayed valiantly to do it, they were fairly driven back by the terrible flight of arrows, which no man could face for long.

The Norman men-at-arms were forced to retreat to the upper chamber of the castle, where, encouraged by Sir Hugo, furious and despairing, they stubbornly continued the defence.

Headed by the Grey Knight, scores of archers rushed through the now undefended gateway, and, mounting the stone stairs, renewed the conflict within the keep itself.

But while this stubborn fight was going on in the upper part of the castle, Friar Tuck, Little John, and several archers were penetrating to the lower recesses in search of Robin Hood, whom they hoped to find still living.

"Tis dark as the pit," muttered the friar. "Have you naught that will kindle a flame?"

"Naught," replied Little John. "We should have entered the kitchen first, for there we could have found some pinewood, and perchance a lantern. Feel your way, good Tuck; you must surely be near the bottom of the stairs."

The words had scarce left Little John's lips ere those who followed heard a sort of howl, then several heavy bumps, and from the darkness beneath them the friar's voice ascended.

"What ails you?" demanded Little John.

"I have found the bottom of the stairs, that is all," was the reply. "Look to your feet, else you will all shoot down suddenly, as I have done, and I have no wish to perform the office of a cushion."

"You would perform it more worthily than your office of priest," retorted Little John, with a laugh.

"A truce to your jests," said the friar angrily. "Here is a door that will need bursting open, methinks. It must lead to the dungeon."

They hammered upon it, and called loudly for Robin Hood, but the only answered that came from within was a muffled groan.

"There is no time for parley," said Little John as he set to work to beat down the door with a ponderous axe.

Very soon it was in splinters.

The dungeon was foul-smelling and reeking with damp, and not a ray of light penetrated to it. By feeling about with their hands they found a man stretched out upon the floor, gagged and bound.

In a few seconds they had freed him.

"Is it you, Robin?" cried Friar Tuck.

"None other!" gasped a weak voice, which they scarcely recognised. "For Heaven's sake help me up and let me breathe the fresh, free air again; and if you could get me a drink of water—"

"Here is that which will do you more good than plain water," said Friar Tuck as he produced a small leather bottle. "'Tis water, truly, but flavoured with sack."

Robin Hood took a deep draught of the liquid, and it did him good. Then they helped him up to the passage which led to the postern.

"Marry, but we were just in time!" said Friar Tuck. "We heard that Sir Hugo had sworn to hang you at mid-day. Is't so?"

Robin Hood's eyes flashed.

"The dastard did so intend," he replied. "But I did not give up hope of rescue. How fares it with the others? Is the castle won?"

"Not yet. The fight rages famously above us. The Grey Knight is a shrewd leader, and a valiant fighter."

"The Grey Knight! By the mass, then, an he has donned armour again, Sir Hugo de Martival had best look to himself. The hour has come when he will have to answer for his misdeeds. Get me a weapon of some sort. I would fain take part in the fight."

Meanwhile, the Grey Knight, at the head of the yeomen, forced his way upward step by step, driving the baron

and his men before him, until he arrived at the corridor which led to the Lady Editha's apartments.

Here he left the outlaws to the leadership of Allan-a-Dale—until Robin Hood presently appeared upon the scene and took over the command of his followers once more—and hurried along until he reached the door of his lady's bower.

The Grey Knight knocked thrice, and a frightened serving-maid answered the summons.

"The Lady Editha!" he cried. "Is she here?"

That fair maiden herself, having recognised her lover's voice, ran forward and, without heeding the presence of her attendants, flung herself into his arms.

"Arthur, dear Arthur," she cried; "thank Heaven you are safe! This bloodshed is terrible. I have seen something of the fight from my casement, and I feared that you might be slain. Where is Sir Hugo?"

"He still lives, and is fighting with the remnant of his followers stubbornly," was the reply. "An I win the castle I will hold it; though, I fear, you will have to seek some other haven of safety, sweet Editha."

"I scarce know where that may be," she said. "But how fares the gallant outlaw, Robin Hood? He was overpowered last night and thrown into a dungeon. Our Lady send that he hath come to no harm."

"Friar Tuck and Little John went in search of him, and by this time I trust he has been released. Ah! 'tis so. Listen! That is his voice that I hear now, encouraging his men. The brave fellow!"

"And calling to you also. Do you not hear him? He calls you by name."

The Grey Knight ran back into the corridor and met Robin Hood, who was approaching hastily. They gripped hands.

"A messenger has just come hot-foot to the castle, bearing a scroll for Sir Hugo, which I took leave to open," said Robin Hood. "It is from the Templar, Rudolph Flambard, and says that he is hastening with five score men-at-arms to Sir Hugo's assistance; and who, think you accompanies them? None other

than Prince John. They have heard of your return, and, it would seem, do also fear greatly that King Richard may not be so very long after you."

"Prince John, the Templar, and five score fresh men!" muttered the Grey Knight. "And your brave fellows already near spent with the hard fight. An we remain here we shall be caught in a trap. 'Tis hard that we should have to beat a retreat when the castle is no near captured; but 'twould be folly to remain. Recall your men, Robin, and we will seek sanctuary with you—the Lady Editha and I—in the green-wood."

"And if the Templar, ay, or Prince John either, with their followers seek us there," replied Robin Hood, "we will give them such a welcome as they will not be like to forget while they live."

"And for us——"

Robin Hood laughed gaily.

"For the Lady Editha and yourself a right royal welcome also; but a royal welcome of a different kind from that which we shall give to Prince John and his myrmidons."

Friar Tuck and several of the foresters went to the stables and saddled a couple of palfreys for the Lady Editha and her maid, and Robin Hood, having withdrawn his men by sound of bugle, they formed a solid escort around the two fair ones and retreated from the castle in good order.

But many a cross-bow bolt was shot at them as they went, for the recreant knight, Sir Hugo de Martival, mad with fury at seeing his ward escaping from his clutches, and also not a little perturbed at the reappearance of Sir Arthur Melton, whose estate he was usurping, would have cared little had he killed them both.

So the gallant archers marched forth again from Rutherford Castle, their mission accomplished. Robin Hood had been rescued, and the beauteous Lady Editha removed from the power of her guardian.

And behind them they left a terrible mark of their prowess in the shape of dead and wounded, for at least one half the defenders of the castle were placed hors de combat. The loss on the side

of the outlaws, though severe, was far less than that of their foes.

The westerling sun had dropped down nigh to the level of the tree-tops, and the shadows were lengthening across sylvan glade and dusty road by the time the forest camp was reached.

The Grey Knight lifted his lady from her palfrey, and a like office was performed by Allan-a-Dale—ever courteous to the fair sex—for the Lady Editha's maid.

"Welcome, right welcome, fair lady," said Robin Hood, doffing his cap, "to the home of the Sherwood Foresters. Such accommodation as we can offer is, perhaps, scarcely fitted for one of your rank; but at least we can give the devotion of brave and true hearts."

"What more should a lady require?" replied the Lady Editha with a sweet smile. "But, sooth to say, it is through the gallantry of yourself and your followers that I have gained something more."

"And that is?"

"Freedom!" was the reply. "Sweet liberty."

CHAPTER 5.

A Victory 'Gainst Norman Might.

Two days passed, and nothing further was heard of the force under Prince John and the Templar, which had been hastening to the relief of Rutherford Castle, except that they had arrived there and were now being entertained by Sir Hugh de Martival to the best of his ability. But as the outlaws had carried off a goodly quantity of his store of provisions, his entertainment was somewhat meagre when the quality of his guests was taken into consideration.

Sir Guy de Wyville was also an inmate of the castle, but it did not seem likely that he would recover from his wounds in time to take part in the attack upon the foresters in their greenwood camp.

That such an attack was really to be made Robin Hood had good means for knowing, although as to when it would take place he had not learnt. He knew only that Prince John had sworn that the "pestilent outlaws," as he termed them, should be cleared from the forest,

and their company disbanded and destroyed.

Although both the prince and the Templar kept their plans a strict secret, Robin Hood took every precaution against a sudden surprise. He had scouts and sentries posted closely in touch with each other in a circle all round the camp, so that no matter from what direction an enemy might approach he would be seen.

Such a gathering of the foresters, so strong in numbers, so well trained and well armed, had never before been known in Sherwood.

In the meantime, the Grey Knight, with a yeoman named Clement, who had constituted himself his esquire, was wandering through the forest somewhat beyond the cordon of outlaw sentinels. His object in so doing was to endeavour to gain some information of the movements of the force of knights and men-at-arms under Prince John from any peasant or woodman who had lately been in the vicinity of Rutherford.

However, they met no one, and, after a time, Clement suggested that it would be wise to return to the outlaws' camp.

"For 'tis possible, Sir Knight," he said, "that a score or more of Sir Hugo's, or the Knight of Tunstall's, men-at-arms may be hanging about on the outskirts of Robin Hood's camp for the very purpose of seizing your person and bearing you off prisoner to Rutherford. Should they succeed, they will be sure of a high reward."

"An any of the scurvy villains attack me, it will be the worse for them," replied the Grey Knight. "We could drive a score of such rascals as these you speak of before us like so many sheep."

"It would be well to remember that a blast on the hunting-horn which I carry would summon Robin Hood and his men to our assistance," pursued Clement.

"By 'r lady, 'twould scarce be worth while to trouble Robin Hood for so small a matter," exclaimed the knight. "But what makes you think that there may be men on the watch to fall upon me, an they can do so unawares?"

"Because I have twice or thrice noticed the glance of a morion from

amongst the green leaves. Had they been honest men they had kept the path."

"By the mass! but I think you are right, Clement," said the knight as he closed his visor.

It was but just in time that he did so, for several arrows flew at the same instant from the suspected thicket against his head and breast.

"Come, Clement," exclaimed the Grey Knight, "let us close with these cowardly villains, and teach them a lesson which they will not easily forget."

He rode straight to the thicket, and was there met by six or seven men-at-arms, who ran against him with their lances at full career.

Two of the weapons struck against the knight, and splintered as if they had been driven against the side of a tower.

The Grey Knight's eyes seemed to flash fire even through the aperture of his visor.

"St. George! A Melton! A Melton!" he cried as he raised himself in his stirrups and, with two terrific blows, struck the nearest of his assailants to the earth.

His opponents, desperate as they were, bore back from an arm which carried death in every blow; but they were presently reinforced by others, who were urged on by a knight in chain-mail armour, with the device of a black boar's head upon his shield.

This cavalier spurred suddenly forward with lance at rest, and, taking aim at the steed which Sir Arthur bestrode, wounded the noble animal mortally.

"That was a dastard stroke!" exclaimed the Grey Knight as the horse fell to the earth, bearing its rider along with it.

Clement, the esquire, who had been engaged with two men-at-arms, having succeeded in wounding one and beating the other off, now winded his horn lustily.

The sound of the bugle made the attacking party back once more, and the esquire, seizing this opportunity, rushed in to assist his master to rise.

"Accursed cowards!" shouted the

knight of the boar's head; "will you fly from the empty blast of a huntsman's horn? Fall to, and the reward may yet be yours."

Thus urged on, they once more attacked the Grey Knight, who, being dismounted, was fain to place his back against an oak and defend himself with his sword.

His enemy, who with the felon stroke had killed his steed, watching the moment when Sir Arthur was most closely pressed, galloped against him in hopes to nail him with his lance against the tree, when a grey-goose shaft, suddenly coming with a "swish" through the air, pierced the joints of his armour where the gorget joined the headpiece, and transfixed his neck through and through.

The knight of the boar's head fell with a crash to the ground, where he lay motionless.

Then, with a shout of "Robin Hood! To the rescue! To the rescue!" a band of yeomen broke forth from the glade, headed by Robin Hood himself and Friar Tuck, who, taking ready and effectual part in the fray, soon disposed of the ruffians.

Sir Arthur thanked his deliverers for their timely assistance, and then turned to the knight, who lay prone with the arrow in his throat.

"Open his visor, Clement," he said. "He was the chief of these villains, and led the dastardly attack upon me."

The esquire instantly knelt by the side of the leader of the would-be assassins, and with no very gentle hand undid his helmet, which rolling to a distance on the grass, displayed to the Grey Knight a countenance which he seemed to recognise.

"I know him," he said, "though I have never had dealings with him in any way. It is Robert Fitzmorris. What could be his reason for attacking me? Does he still live?"

The prostrate knight opened his eyes and moved feebly. It was plain to be seen that he was hurt to death.

"He is past the aid of leech," said Robin Hood. "Do you, friar, attend him with the last offices of holy church."

"Go! Go!" said the dying man.

"Leave me here to die quietly. Look to yourselves, for — there — are — others—"

"Confess ere you pass to another world," said the Grey Knight, bending over him. "Who set you on this treacherous deed?"

"The prince," gasped the baron. "He is even now—on the borders—of the forest—with two—hundred—"

Those were his last words. There was a terrible gasp for breath, his head fell back, and he was dead.

"Prince John on the borders of the forest!" exclaimed Robin Hood. "Then it behoves us to prepare to meet him and those who accompany him. And they must bury their own dead. That will be their first task in the forest."

"There will be others for them to bury ere the sun sets," said Little John grimly, as he felt the string of his bow to see that it was true and unfrayed.

"To the trysting oak, lads!" cried Robin Hood. "'Tis there the fight shall take place, which shall decide whether we are to have our freedom in the forest glades, or be crushed for ever beneath the tyrant's heel."

The clear, shrill notes of a bugle sounded on the still air making the welkin ring again. Once it was blown, then a second time, and then once again.

The Grey Knight, mounted now upon the horse of the fallen baron, in place of his own, rode into the open glade, where the archers were collecting from afar and near.

A forester ran into the clearing. He was one of the scouts.

"They come! They come!" he cried. "Knights and men-at-arms to the number of full two hundred."

"We are prepared," said Robin Hood quietly.

"Would you await their oncoming here?" demanded the Grey Knight.

"Nay, Sir Arthur," replied the outlaw chief. "We will advance, and meet them in the thickest part of the forest. There will lie our advantage, for an they want to come to close quarters they will have to abandon their horses; that is, the knights and others who are mounted."

"'Tis the best plan," agreed Sir

Arthur. "Though in good sooth I myself prefer the open, where I can ride a good course, and tilt at my opponent with lance at rest."

"Each to his taste," replied Robin Hood. "For my part I prefer the good yew bough, or for close quarters axe or staff."

He turned and made a signal to his followers, which was repeated in silence by his lieutenants. A gesture of the hand, no more; but every man there understood it, and in a few moments the open glade was deserted, and the outlaws were pressing through the forest aisles towards the foe.

The advance guard of Prince John's force, a score or so of men-at-arms, were soon met with, and, be it said, soon dealt with.

At the given signal, arrows flew thickly, and before that deadly hail and the swift onset of the archers the first of the enemy swept away like spindrift before the storm.

"Here surely is magic," said the miller's son with a laugh. "For lo! those men have vanished as though a magician had suddenly cast his spell over them."

"'Tis the magic of good archery," said Robin Hood.

Another hundred paces they advanced, then the main body of the foe was met, and the fight began in bitter earnest.

From every side the arrows poured forth in an incessant stream, rattling against the armour of the knights and the breastplates of the men-at-arms. But a counterblast of arrows and crossbow bolts came pouring in now from the enemy's side, carrying death to many a brave forester.

Urged on by Prince John himself, and the Templar, Sir Rudolph Flambard, the Norman soldiers began to close at a run upon the foresters, though the knights themselves could do little but direct the combat, as the trees hampered all who were mounted.

Then followed an obstinate and deadly struggle hand-to-hand. The flight of arrows almost ceased, and there arose the sound of steel clanging upon steel, as with bill, and falchion, and axe the foemen met.

"Robin Hood! Liberty or death!"

"St. George for Merry England!"
"A Flambard! Strike home!"

Thus the battle-cries were shouted while the woods resounded with the din of furious strife. Never in Sherwood had so terrible a fight been waged before, and for long there was little advantage gained on either side.

This did not please the Templar and the other Norman barons who rode with him, for they had expected an easy victory with so many men-at-arms at their back.

Nor did it please Prince John, who was furious at the stubborn resistance offered by the outlaws.

"Draw them into the open!" he exclaimed to the Templar. "Death of my life! Can you not draw them into the open? They have the vantage here amid the trees. But get them in some wide, open glade, and charge down upon them, and the rabble will be routed."

"'Tis not so easy to draw them," returned the Templar fiercely, "for they know as well as we do where their vantage lies. But I will e'en see what may be done by a ruse."

By the sound of trumpet he withdrew some of his men, and rode with them towards a forest glade near by. But this had only the effect of causing some of the archers to exchange spear and axe for the bow once more, and again the arrows began to fly quickly, so that the Templar's followers were glad enough to rush for the shelter of the trees.

However, Sir Rudolph Flambard himself kept on with a few of his men, and the Grey Knight, seeing his manœuvre, spurred his horse to the open, and was there before him.

"So we meet again, on more equal terms this time, Sir Templar!" he cried. "And 'tis to be hoped you will see fit to continue the combat to the end, instead of running away as you did on the last occasion."

"You shall pay dearly for that insult," exclaimed the Templar furiously. "A knight who herds with robbers has but himself to blame if he is mistaken for one of them."

"The outlaws of Sherwood are braver and more honest than you or your brood!" retorted Sir Arthur. "Look to

yourself, for, by the rood! you shall not escape me this time."

The glade was an ideal place for a knightly passage of arms, being of goodly length and width, and no sooner had the Grey Knight uttered his defiance than the two charged down upon each other and closed in the centre of the open space with the shock of a thunderbolt.

The lances burst into shivers up to the very grasp, and it seemed at the moment that both knights had fallen, for the shock had made each horse recoil back upon its haunches.

However, both riders recovered their steeds by the use of knee and spur and, having glared on each other for an instant with eyes which seemed to flash fire through the bars of their visors, each flung away the fragment of his lance which remained in his grasp, and drew his battle-axe.

Swiftly circling round they rode at each other once more, but the advantage was now with the Grey Knight, for he was superior to his antagonist both in strength and skill with the weapon he now wielded. It was but a matter of moments ere Sir Rudolph Flambard crashed to the ground from his horse—dead.

The attempt on the part of the Templar to draw the outlaws into the open having so signally failed, and having indeed ended in his own death, Prince John ordered all the knights who attended him to dismount, and leaving their horses with some attendants, to take part in the fight on foot.

"For thus only can we hope to defeat these pestilent knaves," he cried, "who fight ever where the trees and bushes grow thickest."

The Grey Knight, noting this, and having now no mounted man opposed to him, was quick to follow the Normans' example.

He ranged himself by the side of Robin Hood, who, with Friar Tuck, Little John, Much, and Allan-a-Dale, had formed a quintet that no efforts of the enemy could budge from the position they had taken up.

Bows had been slung upon their backs, for it was hand-to-hand fighting

now and no other, and they hewed their way through the ranks of their opponents with crushing blows of battle-axe, sword, or quarter-staff.

Then came a sudden pause.

A knight, with visor down, and bearing a shield with the device of a lion couchant upon it, all at once confronted them. He was attended by several barons, among them being Sir Hugo de Martival.

"It is Prince John!" exclaimed Robin Hood.

He lowered his weapon as he spoke, for despite the fact that the prince was hated as a tyrant and oppressor, it was yet remembered by all who opposed him that he was the brother of the English monarch, and indeed, during King Richard's absence, was practically monarch himself.

Whosoever raised weapon against him, whether knight or yeoman, might well tremble for the safety of his head if he were captured. But if Prince John attacked first, why, then a man must needs defend himself.

The fight between the main body of the archers and men-at-arms was raging at some short distance away from that spot, for the yeomen were winning and driving the enemy before them, so that the two parties, one headed by Prince John, the other by Robin Hood, were like to have no interruption when they engaged in mortal combat.

"By the mass!" cried the prince. "'Tis the chief of these rebel outlaws himself. He shall not escape!"

With sword uplifted he rushed straight at Robin Hood, and would have clove his skull in twain had the gallant outlaw been taken off his guard. But that he was not.

Dexterously he warded off the blow; yet, still unwilling to raise his weapon against his prince, he flung his axe aside and gripped Prince John by the throat. Robin's plan was to disarm and capture him.

So fierce was his grip that the prince was fain to drop his shield, which fell on the grass at his feet, and while with his left hand he strove to hurl the outlaw back, he stortened his sword in his right to drive home a thrust through the body.

The Grey Knight and the other foresters were by this time engaged in mortal combat with the Normans.

Suddenly one of the barons, noting that the prince was struggling in the grasp of the outlaw chief, and in some danger of choking, sprang behind Robin Hood with weapon swung aloft to strike him down. But the action was seen by Little John, who seized the baron's upraised arm and, planting his knee in his back, pulled him backwards and flung him stunned and bleeding to the ground.

It was at this instant that Friar Tuck, seeing the prince about to plunge his sword into Robin Hood's body, struck the weapon from his grasp with a mighty blow of his quarter-staff, sending it a full score of yards away.

Then all at once a ringing shout went up from a hundred throats.

"St. George for Merry England! Robin Hood and Liberty. The Normans run. Victory! Victory!"

The day was won. The great fight in Sherwood Forest was over; for the Normans were indeed retreating in a rabble, and Prince John was a prisoner in the hands of the outlaws.

CHAPTER 6. Robin and the Royal Captive. — A Treacherous Abduction.

MORNING broke fair and bright over the joyous woodland. It was the morning after the great fight, and save for the trodden-down undergrowth and the broken weapons lying about there was no sign of the terrible strife which had taken place on the previous day.

The dead had been buried, and the wounded were being attended to, some in the outlaws' huts, some in peasants' cottages, and some in a Priory near by.

Prince John had been accommodated in Robin Hood's own woodland residence, which he had given up to him, and the Grey Knight had remained in attendance upon him, at the same time acting as his guard.

As soon as the prince had finished breakfast Robin Hood presented himself at the door of the hut and craved permission of an audience, which John,

with a somewhat ill-grace, was pleased to grant.

"How now, Sir Outlaw?" said the prince, with an angry frown. "Have you come to ask pardon for your offences?"

"I cannot admit, your Highness," replied Robin Hood proudly, "that I have been guilty of any offence, but rather have I been offended against."

"Indeed. How so?"

"In that I and my men were attacked yesterday without cause," was the bold response. "We did but defend ourselves, as any Englishmen would do under like circumstances. It grieves me that your Highness should have been subjected to rough usage, but you will be pleased to remember that I could not stand tranquilly while my life was in jeopardy from your sword."

"Bold words, outlaw," said Prince John, "when your offences are taken into account. Disloyal subjects of the king are you, in that you slay his deer, and being outlawed do still set the laws of the land at defiance. And, in addition, when you raised your hand against me, you were guilty of the crime of treason, for although I am not king, I am yet the king's representative during his absence."

"It is not for me to bandy words with your Highness——"

"Meaning that I am your prisoner," interrupted Prince John, with flush of anger.

"I would rather you had said my guest," replied Robin Hood.

"But a guest is free to come and go as he pleases."

"Even so, your Highness. I herewith return your sword, which you lost in the fray, and at any time that your Highness is pleased to depart an escort of foresters shall accompany you to the verge of the woods."

Prince John was silent. It was an act of generosity for which he was unprepared, and which, as it happened, he was in the mood to appreciate at that moment. He was determined not to be outdone in the granting of favours.

"As I am to be considered as your guest," he said, "the fight of yesterday, and its consequences, shall not be remembered to your disadvantage. As

to your misdemeanours of the past, they shall be forgotten an they be not repeated."

Robin Hood bowed, but made no further reply, for he knew that the word of Prince John was not always to be depended on.

The prince then turned to the Grey Knight.

"Have you any favours to ask, Sir Knight?" he said.

"None," replied Sir Arthur Melton haughtily. "My wrongs shall be righted when King Richard returns to England."

Prince John started and turned pale.

"You were ever in his confidence," he said. "Have you knowledge of his whereabouts, for we have received no reliable communication?"

"I can only assure your Highness that ere long he will certainly be back in England. It may even be that he has already set foot upon these shores. Had you been served by true men, instead of traitors——"

"Traitors! What mean you?" demanded the prince, with an anxious expression. "Be careful, Sir Knight, of what you say, for these vague accusations will not avail you. Give me the name of but one traitor, and, if proof be forthcoming, he shall have his deserts."

"His name," replied Sir Arthur, "is Hugo de Martival, and I can furnish full proofs of his treason. He is a traitor not only to King Richard, but to your Highness also."

"Say you so? Then, by the light of Heaven, an his treason be proved, I will restore to you the fief of Rutherford, which he has held during your absence."

It was in this easy manner that John referred to the lands of which Sir Arthur Melton had been despoiled, in order that the prince might bestow them upon one of his favourites.

"And now, Sir Outlaw," pursued the royal "guest," "I will avail myself of your courtesy and accept an escort as far as the borders of the forest. My steed, I suppose, has not fallen into your hands?"

"Nay, my lord," replied Robin Hood. "Your esquire was as careful of the

safety of your horse as he was of his own body."

"Had his valour been equal to his wisdom," returned Prince John, "I had not, perhaps, been your guest last night."

With that he turned abruptly away, and without further parley strode from the camp, accompanied by the six foresters who had been appointed to guard him until he had reached a place of safety.

They had scarce disappeared from sight amid the forest trees when a messenger rushed up hot-foot to Robin Hood and delivered some startling intelligence.

The Lady Editha, who had gone for safety to the small Priory of Saint Wittold during the great fight, had been abducted that very morning.

"Abducted!" cried Robin Hood fiercely. "What new outrage is this? Who has dared to violate the sanctuary of a holy house and carry her away?"

"The worthy prior, an old man and feeble," replied the messenger, "says that a number of armed men forced their way into the priory this morning and forced the lady to accompany them when they rode off. They were led by a knight whom he recognised."

"Ah!"

"Sir Hugo de Martival."

The Grey Knight, having heard reference made to the Lady Editha, had hurried up, and the terrible news which the messenger had brought was repeated to him.

"Lady Editha fallen into the hands of that dastard again!" he cried. "Then I swear by that which I hold most sacred in this world that I will not rest until I have first rescued her, and then taken summary vengeance on the body of the foul miscreant who has carried her off."

"And, in good sooth, I echo your vow," said Robin Hood, "for the lady was, in a measure, my guest, and Sir Hugo de Martival, recreant knight that he is, shall be treated with but scant ceremony an he falls into my power. Justice—greenwood justice—shall he have, and no more."

"In which direction did they ride off after quitting the priory?" demanded Sir Arthur Melton.

"Towards the north," replied the messenger.

"Then I know full well where they have gone," exclaimed the Grey Knight. "There is a building on my estate of Rutherford, known as Saint Ronan's Chapel. It was at one time a monastery, but has been abandoned by the monks on account of failing water supply. It is there he has taken her, until such time as he thinks he may safely return to the castle."

"Then it behoves us to lose no time in starting in pursuit," said Robin Hood.

Then the Grey Knight mounted his steed and rode away northward towards the chapel of St. Ronan, while Robin Hood, with a half-score of his trustiest archers, also mounted—though for the most part on ponies—rode with him.

* * * * *

The intelligence which the messenger had brought was true in every detail, for Sir Hugo and a small remnant of his men, who had escaped unscathed from the fight, had come to the priory in the early dawn, and without waiting for the janitor to answer their summons had incontinently beaten down the portal and so forced an entrance.

But it was not either the prior or the monks whom they had come to seek, nor did they hope to gain much by seizing upon the treasury, for the priory of Saint Wittold was poor. It was the Lady Editha whom they sought, and they made no secret of their intention to carry her off with or without the consent of the worthy churchman.

"Bid the Lady Editha come forth, as I desire speech with her," cried Sir Hugo to a frightened monk, who stood trembling in the passage.

The monk hastened to do his bidding, and after a time the Lady Editha came forth from her chamber which had been assigned to her, and faced her guardian, pale, but dignified.

"What means this outrage?" she demanded. "And why have you come here thus disturbing the peace of these good men?"

"I care little enough for the monks," replied Sir Hugo. "It is you whom I have come to see, fair lady."

"Why?"

"I have somewhat to say to you, which you may, perchance, not care to hear."

"It is likely enough," retorted Lady Editha, "for there is little that you ever say that I care to hear. But what you have to say, say quickly."

Sir Hugo Martival flushed angrily, and then a cynical smile curled his thin lips.

"You would rather listen to the honeyed words of the knight who has so far forgotten his station as to consort with thieves and felons in the forest," he retorted. "But you may rest assured, fair lady, that you have heard the last speech from his lips."

"What mean you?" exclaimed Lady Editha, turning pale. "It cannot be—that he is dead."

"The head of a man, be he knight or outlaw, who fights against Prince John, is not likely to rest long upon his shoulders," said Hugo de Martival callously. "And if your lover is alive now it is not likely that he will long remain so."

"He is a prisoner, then?"

"Yes."

This statement was a deliberate lie, for Sir Hugo must have known that the Grey Knight, if he had survived the combat, was no prisoner.

"A prisoner! Heaven! then his life will be forfeited!" exclaimed Editha.

"Of that there can be no doubt, unless someone who has influence with the prince can intercede for him," was the reply. "A word from me——"

"Save him, for the love of Heaven!" cried Editha, her firmness now completely giving way under terror for her lover's supposed danger.

"I can, and will, do so on one condition," said De Martival.

"And that is?"

"That you consent to become the bride of Sir Guy de Wyville."

"I might have known that that would be the condition you would impose," returned Editha; "but I tell you now, as I have told you a score of times before, I will never wed Sir Guy."

"Then Sir Arthur Melton shall be left to his fate," said De Martival.

"Your eyes betray you," exclaimed the maiden. "I will not believe that

Sir Arthur is a prisoner. You can tell a lie glibly enough with your lips, but there is a look on your face which proclaims that you are deceiving me."

At this Hugo de Martival changed his tone, no longer making any attempt to conceal the purpose which had brought him there. His black eyes blazed, and his dark face flushed.

"Fore Heaven! I will teach you to speak me fair," he cried. "An I were free I would marry you myself, and your obstinacy would soon be tamed then, I warrant."

"You are as fond of hearing your own voice, and prating of what you will do, as a mountebank at a fair," retorted Editha contemptuously.

"You shall find that I can act as well," instantly came the stern reply. "Within a week you shall wed Sir Guy de Wyville, and the ceremony shall be performed at St. Ronan's Chapel by a priest that I wot of."

"Saint Ronan's Chapel!" faltered the maiden. "You will not dare to take me away from this priory——"

"Not dare! Ha, ha! You have known me long enough, girl, to be assured that I will dare aught to further my own ends."

"A courageous knight truly who makes war on women," exclaimed Editha. "You will dare aught! I trow you will not dare to meet Sir Arthur Melton face to face in the lists."

"Enough! I will waste no more time in listening to you," said De Martival. "Come, follow me instantly."

"I will not follow you," answered Lady Editha. "This is where I shall remain—in this priory—so long as the good fathers will keep me here."

"You shall not choose, Editha. Once you have foiled me, but you shall not do so again."

So saying, he seized on the terrified maiden, and bore her away in his arms in spite of her cries, and in spite of the protestations of the indignant old prior and some of his attendant monks.

Once outside the gates, Sir Hugo placed his ward on a palfrey, and without further ado rode off with his followers towards Saint Ronan's Chapel.

That ancient and neglected place of worship lay somewhat more than a

said to have been properly in possession of the lands which were rightfully his, for although he had succeeded to them on his father's death he had been obliged almost immediately to quit the country to escape the machinations of his enemies, and the danger which threatened him by reason of the hatred of Prince John for all those who were loyal to King Richard.

And as Sir Hugo de Martival was dead, there was no one now to oppose Sir Arthur's marriage with the fair Lady Editha.

Sir Guy de Wyville still lay on a bed of sickness, by reason of the wound which he had received, and which, either through the carelessness of an unskilful leech or through his shattered constitution, seemed likely to take a very long time to heal.

However, he had formally resigned all pretensions to Lady Editha's hand, which, after all, was not a matter of great consequence, for he was a rival whom the Grey Knight simply treated with well-merited contempt.

The nuptials of Sir Arthur Melton and the Lady Editha were celebrated in the chapel of the Priory of Saint Wit-told, at the lady's special request.

And the hearts of the kindly old prior and his brethren of the monastery were made glad on that occasion by a

munificent gift from the Grey Knight and his lady, which would raise them above all fear of poverty so long as the monastery should be in existence.

The bridal ceremony was quiet, and devoid of ostentation, for Sir Arthur Melton declined to issue invitations to any of the Norman barons who had hitherto been either openly or secretly his enemies. There were some noble Saxons present, however—sturdy, true-hearted knights, with none of the overbearing pride which characterised the Normans of that period.

And above all Robin Hood and a score of his merry men were there, and took part in the feast which was given at Rutherford Castle afterwards. It is perhaps needless to say that Friar Tuck, Little John, Much the Miller's son, and Allan-a-Dale were among the number of jovial foresters who had been specially invited. It is equally needless to remark that the friar and Little John proved themselves to be as good trenchermen as they were fighters.

At the conclusion of the ceremony Robin Hood, with a few graceful and appropriate words, presented the bride with a silver arrow, cunningly wrought by a craftsman of Nottingham, as a souvenir of the brief period which she had spent as the guest of the merry outlaws of Sherwood Forest.

THE END.

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Agents for the Colonies (Australia and Canada), Gordon & Gotch, London ; for Canada, The Imperial News Co., Ltd., London ; for South Africa, The Central News Agency, Ltd., and William Dawson & Sons, Ltd., London.